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Between Patrons and Populace: Danish-American Sculptor Carl Rohl-Smith and the Iowa Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in Des Moines

by Aase Bak

Carl Rohl-Smith (1848-1900) received one of his most important commissions in America with the "Iowa Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument" (completed 1897). But his position became difficult as he had to navigate between the different interests of patrons and general public.

"A Danish artist cannot imagine the hardships that being an artist in a foreign land entails. Most of the decisions concerning art are made by the populace." Thus wrote Danish journalist Henrik Cavling (1858-1933) in his travel book *Fra Amerika (From America)* from 1897.¹ He was talking about the Danish-American sculptor Carl Rohl-Smith and the problems he encountered when he worked on the *Iowa Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument* outside the State Capitol in Des Moines, Iowa. And Cavling continued:

Can you believe that the inhabitants of Iowa decided that Rohl-Smith had to model the muse of History from a famous senator's skinny, flat-chested wife, and that the boy standing next to her should represent Lincoln's grandson, a boy of eight with crooked legs and the head of an onion? Rohl-Smith said No, but the people said Yes – and threatened to fire him.²

Henrik Cavling liked a good story—he was the founder of modern journalism in Denmark— and the plot probably got an extra twist. But there is no denying that the construction of the *Iowa Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument* suffered an unusual number of obstacles. It had been planned in the late 1880s in honor of the 70,000 Iowans who fought in the Civil War (1861–65), or the "War of the Rebellion" as it also was called. But problems ensued and disagreements abounded, and it was not until another war, World War II, had made national sentiments in America flourish yet again, that the monument was

inaugurated. This happened in 1945, although construction had ended in 1897.

The 22nd General Assembly of the Iowa Legislature had appointed a Monument Commission in 1888, and subsequently a competition took place. A design by local Iowa artist Harriet A. Ketcham (b. 1846) was chosen. It was rather amateurish, and the artist was asked to remodel it completely.³ But that was only the first of several difficulties that the committee had to tackle. In 1890, a most serious problem arose when Harriet A. Ketcham died unexpectedly. Following a new competition in 1894, the Danish-American sculptor Carl Rohl-Smith, who had made a name for himself in Chicago, was chosen to complete the monument. He inherited the main layout of Ketcham's second proposal, but he chose to rethink parts of the sculptural details. The main reason for the ensuing conflicts was the fact that the monument was a democratic art project executed by an artist trained in Europe. The fine arts and the opinion of the people—or the populace, as Cavling would have it—do not always go well together. As a matter of fact, they rarely do.

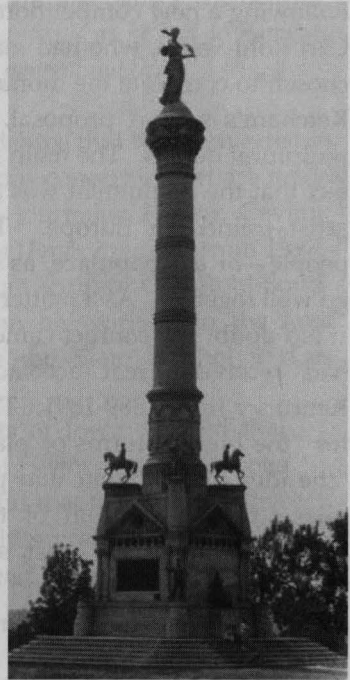
No doubt the conflict came as a surprise to Carl Rohl-Smith who had received great accolades when he worked in Louisville, Kentucky from 1889-1891. There, he was praised for raising a taste for "the highest forms of plastic art" in the city, and for changing "the idea of the public and private monuments from mere angular piles....to a realization of the actual office of sculpture."⁴ In Chicago, where the artist still lived while working on the Des Moines monument, he had made a sculpture group for train car millionaire George Pullman representing *The Fort Dearborn Massacre*, 1892-93. That sculpture also received rave reviews (although it later became an embarrassment to the Chicago City Council because of its portrayal of Native Americans). It was said that George Pullman had recommended the artist for the job in Iowa.

Another guess would be that Carl Rohl-Smith got the commission because he gave the lowest bid. According to papers in The State Archives of Iowa, his bid of \$21,500 was just \$500 below that of renowned American sculptor Lorado Taft, while other prominent artists like R.W. Bock and H.A. McNeil, who also had been in the competition, were much more expensive. In the end Rohl-Smith

received \$18,000 for his work, while the project as a whole had a budget of \$147,000. The majority of the amount went for construction works of the base and casting in bronze. Lorado Taft in his *History of American Sculpture* from 1903, claimed that the monument was "poorly paid" and that the "gravely grotesque design...was dictated to him [Rohl-Smith] by a committee, and his share in it was a long-drawn-out martyrdom, unfortunately perpetuated in bronze." ⁵ Talk about "sour grapes"—Taft was the one who had been outbid by \$500.

For his \$18,000 Rohl-Smith modeled a female figure representing *Victory* for the top of the monument's tall column (the monument stands 140 feet tall), four mounted generals, some 36 portrait medallions, two pieces of relief showing scenes from the war, four larger-than-life soldiers from each of the military services, a statue representing Iowa, and the aforementioned Muse of History.

Rohl-Smith had a talent for creating statuary on a monumental scale, and each of his four mounted generals could have carried a monument on their own. But since the layout of the monument was a given, the artist fought an uphill battle to accommodate the figures to the larger structure, where the coaches had to balance precariously at the corners of the plinth, some 40 feet up. Rohl-Smith also had a definite knack of installing likeness in his portraits. It is therefore ironic that these sculptures, which are portraits of real life generals Marcellus M. Crocker, Grenville M. Dodge, Samuel R. Curtis, and John M. Corse, were placed where it is impossible to recognize them. The four soldiers placed at the base of the monument fare better. They also were modeled after real life



General view of Iowa Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument

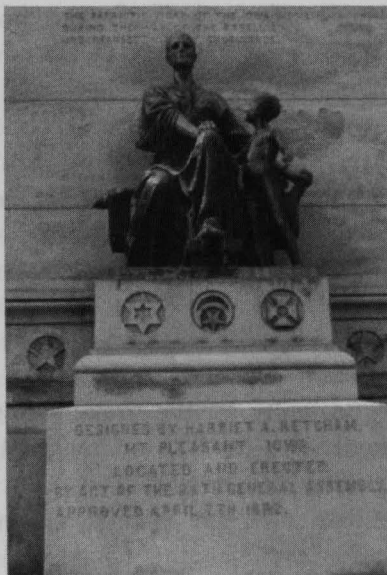
soldiers: infantryman Shelby Norman, 18 (died in action); artilleryman Captain Henry H. Griffiths; cavalryman Lt. James Horton; and ensign William H.C. Michael, the latter a teacher turned sailor, and therefore a symbol of the efforts and sacrifices of ordinary Americans.

"Likeness" is one artistic quality usually cherished by laymen. Carl Rohl-Smith had received ample proof of this when he modeled a portrait of a Mr. Watterson in Louisville. *The Louisville Commercial* reported that the bust was "so lifelike as to cause one near-sighted visitor [at an exhibition] to speak to it for Mr. Watterson himself"

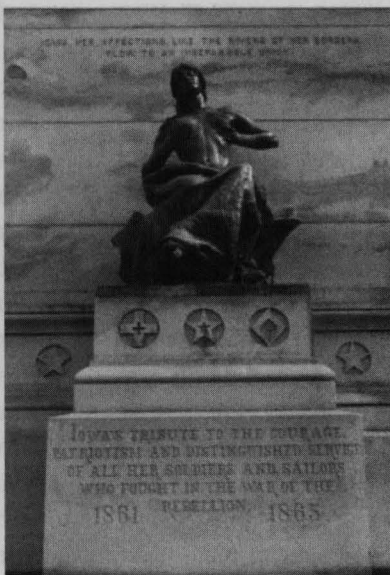
⁶ And in 1886, when Rohl-Smith made a portrait medallion of Samuel F. Clemens (aka Mark Twain), the author wrote to him, "Dear Sir, Mrs. Clemens says that your profile medallion of me is exact to the life. From what I know of my front-face, I think this is true: from what I know of my wife's steady veracity, I can go further to say: I know it is. Very truly yours, S.L. Clemens." ⁷

But in Iowa, "likeness" was not necessarily seen as a blessing—not in this connection anyway. In 1896, for instance, the 26th General Assembly that had the superior responsibility for the project was presented with a motion that there should be placed "... no image or medallion portrait of any man, living or dead, upon said monument or append thereto any figures other than such that are typical, as such special recognition exalts one soldier above another of equal or more deserving record." ⁸ Another motion suggested that "...the commission...[is] direct[ed] to remove the figure on the top thereof and erect in its place a typical soldier in full dress uniform in the position of right shoulder shift arms with rifle in his hand faced toward the Capitol building." ⁹ It also was suggested that 600 ballots be sent to veteran soldiers so they could vote on the subject. ¹⁰ A last motion summed up the criticism: The monument is "unsatisfactory in many of its proposed features, and is unfavorably received by the people of the state as the expression of their sentiments ... [it] will result in dissatisfaction, complaint and constant mortification of the old soldiers, their friends and to the state generally...." ¹¹ Obviously, nothing came of the objections, since there is a monument, a *Victory* on top of it, and plenty of portrait medallions.

But there had been other telling disagreements between patrons, public, and artist. In presenting the allegorical sculptures *Iowa – Mother of the Nation* and *The Muse of History*, Rohl-Smith picked up on ideas already in the original concept by Harriet A. Ketcham, but he elaborated on the themes in ways that diverged considerably from the original design. It caused heated debate when it dawned upon people that *Iowa* was to appear naked.



The Muse of History



Iowa – Mother of the Nation

"The people of Iowa", said one of the commissioners, expressing a typical sentiment, "know how beautiful Iowa is without exposing her charms to the vulgar and irreverent gaze of strangers from other states."¹² Rohl-Smith's idea was to present an allegory of the bounty of Iowa, as emphasized in the sentence cut into the granite above the figure: IOWA – HER AFFECTIONS LIKE THE RIVERS OF HER BORDERS FLOW TO AN INSEPARABLE UNION. It was a common practice in the Old World to couch ideas in pictorial language such as this. Iowa's nurturing breasts were meant to represent the two rivers, Missouri and Mississippi, that border the state to the east and the west and are the sources of Iowa's fertility and bounty. The rivers flowed together "in inseparable union" (in St. Louis), just as America was again one "inseparable union"

following the contribution of the Iowa soldiers and sailors in the Civil War. Layer upon layer of meaning.

Iowans were not prepared for this puzzle. All they saw was the nakedness. Thus, the Monument Commission went to Chicago in 1895 to see the model, and afterwards Rohl-Smith explained his position in a letter, now in the Iowa State Archives:

The question was treated by some members as being exclusively a question of nudity or not nudity. In this case it is a question of Sculpture's capability of representing the nude chaste. The nude figure has, from the earliest time in History, been an important factor in the educational life of the Nations...there are few among those knowing the development of Art through the ages, who would question its moral significance...I am happy to be among the pioneers to introduce purity in nude form in our country and to be able to emphasize the chastity in the nude so strongly that our women and children shall not blush, and men learn that there is more to a woman's body than filthiness, which must be draped.¹³

The case received widespread attention, also outside the state. *The Minneapolis Tribune*, for instance, was highly amused and brought a cartoon to suggest a proper dress for Iowa, corset and all.

The critics had a point, though. It was easy to argue for "spirituality" and "moral superiority" in a classicistic sculpture with its "timeless" features and sleek surface, as had been done some fifty years earlier in a famous incident in American art history. Then, the nudities of Hiram Powers's statue *The Greek Slave* was explained to Puritans and other skeptics as being a moral statement; it was the soul of the slave, not her body, that had been exposed. Rohl-Smith's *Iowa*, however, was modeled in the realistic *Beaux-arts*-style that the artist had picked up in Paris, and she was clearly a woman of her own time. Her hair and body type was distinctly late 19th century. She could have been the neighbor's daughter. In addition, her proud stance and provocative attitude had obvious erotic overtones. The Monument Commission only half-heartedly bought the artist's argument, and approved the statue under protest.

Iowa finally got its imposing monument with all its flaws, and Carl Rohl-Smith went on to even greater tasks. In 1896, he had won the competition for a monument for General William Tecumseh Sherman for Washington, D.C. That monument is placed at one of the most visible spots in the United States, next to the White House and in front of the Treasury Building. And it became controversial for different reasons. Rohl-Smith's ambition had been to be accepted as an American artist, and he tried to act the naturalized American. He involved himself in American projects while talking of "our" country. But he was perceived as a stranger, and other American sculptors found it hard to accept that a "foreigner" took their jobs. In a letter to the well-known Danish artist J.F. Willumsen (1863-1958) who had sought his advice before emigrating to America, Rohl-Smith expressed the unfriendly sentiments with these bitter words:



*Carl Rohl-Smith
sculpting.*

...in the past couple of years I have won a few competitions and executed some important public monuments whereby I have trespassed into one of the areas where their [the American artists'] greed and national vanity will not tolerate foreigners, and artists' circles have become hostile towards me, and they do not hesitate to use dirty tricks to stop me.¹⁴ Rohl-Smith died unexpectedly in 1900 during a visit to Denmark, only 52 years old. His widow Sara took it upon herself to complete the Sherman monument with the help of imported Danish sculptors. American sculptors declined to participate.

Carl Rohl-Smith did not have close relations with Danish American groups. But the Danes in America reveled in the light of their famous countryman, as expressed by the author Clemens Petersen (1834-1918) in the magazine *Norden* at the unveiling of the Sherman monument in 1903, "...among ourselves it evokes a mutual sense of home and community...which means so much when you live as a stranger in a foreign country."¹⁵

It is therefore interesting to note that a number of Rohl-Smith's original plaster sculptures have experienced something of an afterlife in Danish America. The artist's widow brought all his original plaster models back to Denmark in the early 1900s, but after several misfortunes—among them a shipwreck—they ended up in the attic of the Danish Parliament at Christianborg Castle in Copenhagen during World War II. They were still there in the early 1980s, not really missed by anyone. The sculptures legally belong to the Trapholt Museum in Kolding (formerly Kolding Kunstforening), but with the approval of the Statens Museumsnævn (The Danish State Council for Museums) they were transferred to The Danish Immigrant Museum in Elk Horn, Iowa, as a long-term loan, in 1992. There they are still awaiting exhibition space. When, and if, they are put on exhibition they will attest to one of the more interesting and complex stories of cultural clashes experienced by Danish immigrants in America.

¹ Henrik Cavling *Fra Amerika I-II*. København: Gyldendalske Boghandels Forlag, 1897, Part II, p. 134 f. Translation by Hanne E. Jørgensen and Daniel H. McCarthy

² Ibid. Author's translation

³ The story of the competition is told by Louise Rosenfield Noun in her article "The Iowa Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument" in *The Palimpsest*, published by State Historical Society of Iowa, May-June 1986, pp. 80-93. Also see Cora Chaplin Weed *Hand Book for Iowa Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument*, Iowa 1898

⁴ *The Courier Journal*, Louisville, Kentucky, February 2, 1890

⁵ Lorado Taft *The History of American Sculpture*, 1903, p. 467

⁶ *Louisville Commercial*, Louisville, Kentucky, February 12, 1890

⁷ Letter to Carl Rohl-Smith from Samuel F. Clemens (Mark Twain), dated December 31, 1886, in Carl Rohl-Smith's scrapbook in The Danish Emigration Archives, Aalborg, Denmark

⁸ Minutes of the 26th Iowa General Assembly, 1896, p. 92

⁹ Ibid., p. 153

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 248

¹¹ Ibid., p. 590

¹² *The Chicago Times*, December 22, 1894

¹³ Letter from Carl Rohl-Smith to the Monument Commission, dated December 9, 1895. Iowa State Archives, Des Moines, Iowa, File "Soldiers Sailors Monument"

¹⁴ Letter from Carl-Rohl Smith to J.F. Willumsen, dated February 19, 1900, in. J.F. Willumsens Museum, Frederikssund, Danmark. Author's translation

¹⁵ Clemens Petersen in *Norden*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (July 1903), p. 51. Author's translation